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JUSTIFICATION-
CATHOLIC
versus
PROTESTANT

Present Truth

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Present Truth publishes a monthly magazine in which the great Reformation truth of justification by faith is the central theme. The paper is dedicated to upholding this great truth at this time while it is being threatened by humanism, Pentecostalism, and Ecumenism.

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Justification—Catholic versus Protestant

Several hundred years ago the religious world was involved in the greatest religious conflict that this world has ever witnessed. A tremendous amount of literature has recorded a blow-by-blow account of the epic Catholic-Protestant struggle. Yet, after 400 years have gone by, the professed sons of the Reformation generally have very little idea of the real issues of the conflict. If you ask a Protestant what Roman Catholics teach concerning justification, you will most likely be told that Catholics believe that a sinner may be justified by his own works of merit. But listen to what an authoritative Catholic catechism teaches:

“Q. What is justification?

“A. It is a grace which makes us friends of God.

“Q. Can a sinner merit this justifying grace?

“A. No, he cannot; because all the good works which the sinner performs whilst he is in a state of mortal sin, are dead works, which have no merit sufficient to justify.

“Q. Is it an article of the Catholic faith, that the sinner, in mortal sin, cannot merit the grace of justification?

“A. Yes; it is decreed in the seventh chap. of the sixth sess. of the Council of Trent, that neither faith, nor good works, preceding justification, can merit the grace of justification.

“Q. How then is the sinner justified?

“A. He is justified gratuitously by the pure mercy of God, not on account of his own or any human merit, but purely through the merits of Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ is our only mediator of redemption, who alone, by his passion and death, has reconciled us to his Father.

“Q. Why then do Protestants charge us with believing, that the sinner can merit the remission of his sins?

“A. Their ignorance of the Catholic doctrine is the cause of this, as well as many other false charges.”—Rev. Stephen Keenan, *Doctrinal Catechism*, pp. 138, 139.

Many Protestants are awakening to the fact that Catholics do teach a doctrine of justification by faith. With surprise they are saying, “I always thought that Catholics taught that a sinner could be justified by his own works of merit. But they do not teach this. I have been subjected to some uncharitable Protestant propaganda about Catholic doctrine. Why, they believe in the saving grace of God the same as we do!”

There is no question but that Catholic doctrine has always taught that a sinner is justified by a grace that comes from God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Then what was the doctrinal bone of contention between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation?

Two Aspects of Redemption

There are two great aspects of redemption:

1. Christ's work for us.
2. The Holy Spirit's work in us.

Christ's work for us: We may call this God's work in Christ. This work of redemption was done entirely apart from us and without our assistance. Jesus lived a perfect life for us. He "died for our sins according to the Scriptures." 1 Cor. 15:3. He "was delivered for our justification." Rom. 4:25. He entered the sanctuary, "having obtained eternal redemption for us." Heb. 9:12. "He ever liveth to make intercession for them." Heb. 7:25. He appears "in the presence of God for us." Heb. 9:24.

The Spirit's work in us: Without the work of the Holy Spirit working in the believer, the sacrifice of Jesus would be of no avail. The Spirit works **in** what Christ has worked **out**. The Holy Spirit carries out God's work of grace **in** us.

These two aspects of redemption are illustrated by the two streams of blood and water which flowed from the pierced side of Jesus. Jesus offers His blood for us in the sanctuary above. The Spirit – represented by the water – sanctifies the heart of the believer in Jesus.

Thus far all Christians should be agreed, whether they be Catholics or Protestants. Now we must define the great dividing of the way which separates the streams of Catholic and Protestant thought.

The Catholic Concept of Justification

Roman Catholics do not teach that a sinner can be justified by his own works of merit. Briefly, their position on justification is this: Christ's work for us has made the gift of the Holy Spirit available to believers. (They are right thus far.) Men must first receive an **infusion** of righteousness by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit must work repentance and charity in the believer. God then pronounces the believer just because of the work that the Holy Spirit has done in him.

Or to express it another way: Catholics teach that a man is justified before God only when the Holy Spirit has given that man a just nature. God merely ratifies the work which the Holy Spirit has done in the heart of the believer.

The Birth of Protestantism

The Reformers were led to abandon the idea that the Holy Spirit's work in them could make them righteous in the sight of God. These were men who experienced, as few men have ever experienced, the power of sin in their lives. They knew what it was to struggle for holiness of heart. Never were there more earnest Roman Catholics than Luther, Calvin, Farrel, Melancthon and Tyndale. They believed that holiness came only from God, and they tried to apprehend enough holiness in their lives in order that they could be accepted before God.

Yet, being honest men, they could never see enough of God's grace in their experience to give them any confidence toward God. Indeed, as they looked deep within their poor hearts, they saw sin in the form of pride, selfishness, unbelief, unresponsiveness to God's love, and egotism. They despaired of ever being justified by virtue of God's work of grace in them.

Then came their enlightenment in the evangelical faith. They rediscovered Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. In the book of Romans the apostle sets forth the gospel truth that the sinner is not justified by an infused righteousness, but by an **imputed** righteousness—meaning a righteousness that is found wholly in Another. A believer is not justified by virtue of what God has wrought out in him, but by virtue of what God has wrought out in Jesus Christ.

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." Rom. 3: 21-28.

"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also." Rom. 4:4-11.

In these words of the apostle Paul, the Reformers found a certain ground of hope. They saw that men need not look within their own experience to find something that will give them any assurance that they may stand acceptable before God. The Reformers were confronted with the great

gospel truth that God had already forgiven and accepted them in Jesus Christ, that justification had passed upon the whole human race in the gift of Christ, that God had already reached down and made the human family the friends and children of God in Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:10, 18). And by faith in God's perfect work, faith alone in God's finished work in Jesus Christ, they could now rejoice that the righteousness of Jesus was freely imputed to them.

Good Works and Justifying Merit

We must never charge Catholics with teaching that a sinner, in his unregenerate state, can do any good works that have merit in God's sight. But they do teach that there is merit in the good works wrought out in the life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice:

"Q. Must we then conclude, that the sinner cannot, by good works, obtain the grace of justification?"

"A. The sinner may obtain the grace of justification by good works proceeding from a broken and penitent heart, because these are necessary predispositions and conditions, but no works of his own can ever MERIT the grace of justification."

"Q. What is that which gives their value to good works?"

"A. Sanctifying grace, which is within us."

"Q. Is this sanctifying grace our own, or is it from God?"

"A. It is the pure gift of God's liberality to us."

"Q. How does St. Paul express himself on this subject? (Ro., chap. v, 3.)"

"A. 'The charity of God,' he says, 'is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, who is given to us.'"

"Q. What are the effects of sanctifying grace?"

"A. It makes us the friends and children of God."—Rev. Stephen Keenan, *Doctrinal Catechism*, pp. 139, 144, 145.

The Protestant Reformers utterly rejected the idea that there is justifying merit even in works wrought out by the power of the Holy Spirit. Although the Catholic position on good works was clothed with the appearance of sanctity, Luther discerned that it was the mind of the mystery of iniquity. In theory, Catholic doctrine teaches men

to trust in God's work in them. In practice, it leads them to actually depend upon their own works. Armed with the great teaching of the sinfulness of man's nature, Luther was able to show that the good works of the best saints were defiled by the sinfulness and imperfection of human nature (Eccl. 7:20, etc.). Good works, declared the Reformers, could only be considered good if the merits of Jesus were added to them to make up for their deficiency and imperfection.

Wrote Luther, "No one can be certain that he is not continually committing mortal sin, because of the most secret vice of pride." The pope condemned this statement in his bull excommunicating Luther, but the Reformer responded, "Therefore I must retract this article, and I say now that no one should doubt that all our good works are mortal sins, if they are judged according to God's judgment and severity and not accepted as good by grace alone." Again he declared, "Every good work is sin unless it is forgiven by the mercy of God."—Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 149. In his *Commentary on Galatians* (pp. 176, 177), Luther thundered that the merits of all works, "before grace and after," should be thrown down to hell. Thus did this man of God teach that we can never look within us for any work of justifying merit.

Contrary to Roman Catholicism, the Protestants taught that while sanctifying grace within a believer enables him to do good works, only the merits of Christ could make those good works acceptable to God. Sanctifying grace does not make us the friends of God, they said, but is rather the **fruit** of becoming God's children by faith in Christ's work done wholly outside of us.

The Freedom and Certainty of the Gospel

Before his enlightenment, Luther vainly looked within his own heart for enough repentance or conversion to assure him of his acceptance with God. "How dare I believe in the favour of God, while there is nothing in me like true conversion? I must be changed before He can receive me." Such was the Roman darkness that enveloped his soul. He dreaded those scriptures which speak of repentance. But after his enlightenment in the gospel, the passages so much dreaded became his delight—to use his own words, 'an agreeable sport, and the most delightful recreation.' All the passages of Scripture which frightened him seem now to rise up from all sides, smiling, and leaping, and sporting with him."—J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 1, pp. 130, 131.

Luther contemplated with great joy the words of Paul, "[Christ] loved me, and gave Himself for me." Gal. 2:20. While he was a wretched sinner in a state of rebellion against God, Luther perceived that the Lord of glory forgave him freely in Jesus Christ and bestowed upon him all the treasures of eternity. Luther saw that he could experience justification solely by believing in what Christ had done for him.

The Catholic Council of Trent decreed that God only justifies those who are born again. But Protestantism held to the great declarations of the apostle Paul:

"... but believeth on Him that justifieth the **ungodly**" Rom. 4:5.

"God imputeth righteousness without works." Rom. 4:6.

"Faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness . . . not in curcumcision, but in uncircumcision." Rom. 4:9, 10.

"God would justify the heathen through faith." Gal. 3:8.

God justifies the **ungodly**, the **uncircumcized** and the **heathen** through faith without works. This doctrine is an offense to "good, clean Christian people." But to the Reformers who had struggled for years to find favor with God through the work of the Holy Spirit in them, it was a message of unspeakable joy. God freely loves and forgives the vilest sinner, and sets him free from all condemnation solely because he has faith in God's wonderful work in Jesus Christ.

Christ came to save sinners (Matt. 9:13; I Tim. 1: 15) and because I am a sinner I am entitled to come to Christ. I know of no better news given under heaven than that. In this word of truth I may have the greatest certainty, liberty and boldness, whereby I may believe in God's work of grace for me in Jesus Christ. The message of the gospel is that God loves sinners, that while they were in sin and rebellion He passed the free gift of justification upon all men (Rom. 5:18). In God's own purpose of love which He has purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord, He has already accepted and forgiven the whole human race. The great question to be decided is not, "Will God forgive and accept me?" He has done this in Jesus Christ. If God could reconcile us to Himself when we were enemies (Rom. 5:10), how much more will he love and receive us, and pronounce us righteous, when we accept His great gift by faith. The great question to be decided is, "Will I accept God's adoption as his son by Jesus Christ unto Himself? Will I accept the free pardon already given in Jesus Christ?"

In the gospel of the imputed righteousness of Christ, the Reformers beheld the smiling face of the heavenly Father. God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to bestow His blessing of loving favor upon the children of men. The gospel is the good news of what God has done. In Jesus Christ the world has been accepted into the family of heaven.

The Protestants did not deny the reality or necessity of God's work of grace in the hearts of men by the power of the Holy Spirit. They did not make light of good works. But they placed truth in its right order. **They perceived that faith in Christ's work for us brings the Holy Spirit to work in us.** They accepted with joy the grand gospel message that God justifies freely, solely on the ground, the solid ground, of Christ's work for us. This blessed truth of justification by faith brought from their hearts such a response of love and gratitude to God that the windows of their souls were thrown open heavenward, and they experienced the renewing and sanctifying power of God's Spirit in their lives. The repentance and good works which they formerly tried to grind out of their own poor hearts, sprung forth spontaneously. The whole of Europe shook with a mighty army of evangelicals on the march. Through their preaching of justification by faith, the Papal power received a deadly wound.

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